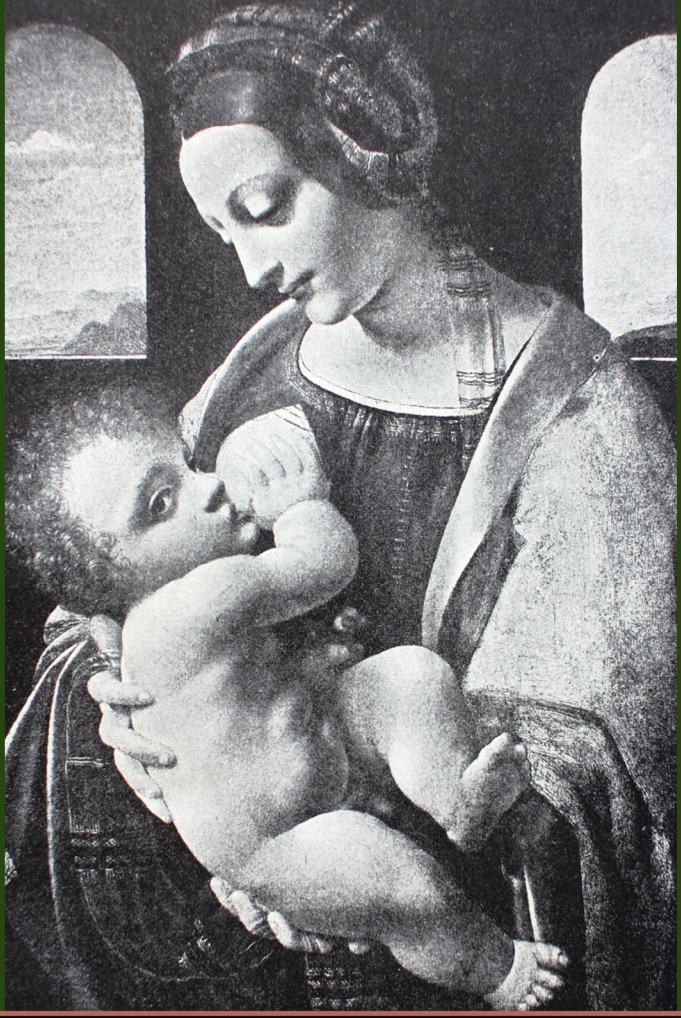

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AND HIS MOTHER IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALIAN CULTURE

DANIELA BINI

Portrait of the Artist and His Mother in Twentieth-Century Italian Culture

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To Joseph, Leo, and Laura

Contents

Acknowledgments

I had two purposes for writing this book. First was the desire to explore the artistic geniuses I have been dealing with for much of my scholarly career, as human beings, to take them off their pedestals. They have been idolized by critics and audiences, including me. Of course, they are all males! It gave me a certain satisfaction to view them like all of us, with less admirable qualities that are rarely mentioned. I have focused on those produced by their relationships with their mothers and that have found ample, not always attractive, outlets in their works.

Many have supported me in this endeavor with advice and frank discussions. I hold none responsible for the sometimes controversial opinions here expressed. My old friend and former colleague Millicent Marcus deserves my heartfelt gratitude. Warm thanks go to my colleagues at the University of Texas—Douglas Biow, Guy Raffa, and Paola Bonifazio—and also to my students who, over the years, continue to inspire my teaching. One of them, Steve Eaton, who has become an expert translator of Luigi Pirandello, has even edited part of my manuscript. Without precious corrections and suggestions from anonymous external readers, my manuscript would not have reached its current publishable form. I wish to express my gratitude to them. The editor of the Series in Italian Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson UP, Anthony Tamburri, deserves much credit for his helpful advice, as do Sian Gibby and Terri Morissey for their very competent jobs of copyediting and indexing. Warmest thanks go to Zachary Nycum, associate editor at Rowman & Littlefield, for his admirable patience, expert direction, and constant help with a variety of questions and issues that frequently arose. I was helped in my final steps by Lisa Dammeyer, assistant editor at Rowman & Littlefield. Thank you so much, Lisa! My first editor (fifty years and counting) has always been

my husband Joe Carter, always ready with loving support even when I was losing faith in myself.

In my scholarly research, one interest has led to another, and my books, in some way, are linked. It was my teaching and my book on Pirandello that led to the present work; and Pirandello is, in fact, the focus of the first chapter. A recent friendship with Pier Luigi Pirandello, who sadly passed away in 2019, and his wife, Giovanna, made me even closer to Luigi, and I want to express my warmest gratitude now to Giovanna for having included me in the circle of their friends.

And now to the second purpose (and driving force) for writing this book. As I mention in the Introduction, I was born and spent my adolescent years in Italy surrounded by a good number of *mammoni* (mama's boys). I fortunately moved to this country and married an American. My three children—Joseph, Laura, and Leo—might not have turned out as well (I believe), had I remained and married in Italy. Nonetheless, I remain an Italian mother, and this culture is still part of me. My relations with my children, female as well as male, have been a constant concern. Have I been too concerned? Yes, I wrote this book in part to exorcise my own demons. . . . The book is dedicated to my sons Joseph and Leo with apologies for the mistakes I have surely made, and to my daughter Laura with thanks for helping me to recognize them, and perhaps to correct some.

Per i miei figli!

Introduction

Mamma, solo per te la mia canzone vola
Mamma, sarai con me tu non sarai più sola
Quanto ti voglio bene, queste parole d'amore
Che ti sospira il mio cuore
Forse non s'usano più
Mamma, ma la canzone mia più bella sei tu
Sei tu la vita e per la vita non ti lascio mai più.

(Mama, only for you my song flies
Mama, you'll be with me and no longer alone
How much I love you. These words of love
That my heart whispers to you
Perhaps are no longer in fashion.
Mama, but my most beautiful song is you,
You are my life and for all my life I will never leave you)[1]

Mamma mia
Quando tu mi coprivi se avevo freddo, mi nutrivi se avevo fame, mi confortavi quando piangevo . . . quando vegliavi le notti per me e il giorno ti preoccupavi per me—dimmi, allora facevi questo come una bambina fa colla sua bambola, che può ripetere senza fine ogni giorno lo stesso gioco . . . o lo facevi come la mia mamma e mi nutrivi e mi riparavi e mi curavi perché ti crescessi forte e sano, perché nella piccola, tenera, stupida cosa bisognosa di tutto, priva di difesa e di sicurezza . . ., tu sognavi l'uomo, l'uomo forte, sicuro di sé di fronte ad ogni cosa, che non ha più bisogno d'alcuna cosa ch'egli non sappia ch'egli non possa? . . . Tu allora non giocavi alla mamma, ma eri veramente la mamma. . . . Tu non mi curavi per potermi curare ancora in futuro—non mi curavi con la speranza che io ti rimanessi eternamente fragile e impotente oggetto di cure—ma

anzi per non aver più da curarmi, perché io non avessi più bisogno che nessuno mi curi.

(Mother
When you covered me up, because I was cold, fed me if I was hungry, comforted me when I cried . . . when you kept watch over me at night and worried about me during the day—tell me, did you all this then as a little girl does with her doll, who can repeat endlessly every day the same game . . . or did you do it as my mother and you fed, protected, and sheltered me so that I would grow strong and healthy, because in that little, tender, stupid thing in need of everything, lacking any defense and safety . . . you were dreaming of the man, a strong man, sure of himself in front of anything that he does not know or cannot do? . . .You then did not play the mother, but you truly were the mother. . . .You did not take care of me in order to continue to take care of me in the future, you did not do it with the hope I would remain forever a frail and impotent object of your cares, but in order not to take care of me any longer, in order that I would no longer need anyone to take care of me. (Michelstaedter's letter to his Mother) [2]

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

I was born in Rome into a family where males were in the majority and have spent most of my mature life in the United States. This book grew out of an attempt to exorcise some demons that have accompanied me throughout much of my adult life. This song from a son to his mother sums it up. The love of an Italian mother for her son(s) can be excessive and can damage them both. I have two sons and, thank God, a daughter. She has helped me in particular see my relation to all my children in a more balanced way. At the same time, life in the United States and an American husband have provided a perspective that helped me to develop a more objective eye for the society I left as a young woman—a perspective I am sure I could never have gained had I remained in my country of birth. And I think it also helped me to be a better mother. Or so I hope. Yes, I am sure it did, as I reflect on many Italian mothers I know well, including my own, and compare myself to them. I speak of Italy because it is familiar ground, but my observations could probably be applied to other Latin countries as well. Italian society until very recently—things are very slowly changing—has been male-centered, with mothers re-inforcing this, sometimes unconsciously. Daughters continue to get up from the table to serve and clean up, and they routinely wash dishes and make beds more often than the sons in the house. They still have less freedom than their brothers. What is of most interest to me, however, is the personal relationship mothers establish with their sons—a relationship that has ancient antecedents.

SAINTLY MOTHERS AND EROTIC WOMEN

Mammismo, or the pathological reciprocal dependence of son and mother, has been the object of serious studies, comic representations, and jokes in Italy and abroad. Like all stereotypes, *mammismo* has some sound basis and is a characteristic of many Italian males, as the Edinburgh Forum *Mothers and Mammismo in the Italian Diaspora* that took place in May 2014 proves.[3] Anna Bravo, in her presentation "Madri fra oppressione ed emancipazione" (Mothers Between Oppression and Emancipation), talked about the mother as a "glorious archetype." She gives herself totally to her son, thus creating in him an intense emotional dependency.[4] Contemporary historian Marina d'Amelia, however, argues that the strong relationship between mother and son is an "invented tradition" of the postwar period. In fact, she considers it an invention of writers, clearly males, who tried to find female causes for Italy's social problems. It was the writer Corrado Alvaro, according to d'Amelia, who first used the term *mammismo*, attributing to it the source of many of Italy's problems.[5] "The nature of Italian *mammismo*, Alvaro concludes, is doubly nefarious: because it is at the origin of the traditional Italian immorality, of the lack of civic education, and the political immaturity of a population, and because it is the proof of a way of giving life without any sense of responsibility" (d'Amelia 17). Although the term *mammismo* was born in the 1950s, the phenomenon is certainly older; d'Amelia herself devoted many pages to the Romantic and Risorgimento period where the mothers of many patriots became their spiritual and political supporters. The words of Maria Drago, Giuseppe Mazzini's mother, could not speak more clearly: "Who ever, if not I can know all your intimate feelings, from the most delicate to the most profound? Not even you can believe how much I am inside you and identify with you. If you were, God forbid, ever to become mute, and you were with me, I could understand all that could help your mood and desires without even your slightest sign" (d'Amelia 54). All this apparent sharing of the sons' political ideals, however, d'Amelia argues, "had little to do with the sharing of [their] political hopes and much more with the mothers' narcissism and emotional needs. Very fine was also the line that separated the predilection for the male child from his deification" (65–66).

The sociocultural historian Silvana Patriarca agrees with d'Amelia and considers the *mammismo* stereotype in line with the Italian tradition of self-denunciation of the Italian character. In her book *Italianità. La costruzione del carattere nazionale*, she challenges the very concept of "national character" that, in her view, "personifies and therefore reifies a collectivity, without taking into consideration important differences on the individual level . . . and encourages intellectual laziness since it takes for granted existent

stereotypes."[6] One cannot object to the soundness of this statement and the need to work to counter the complacency and "laziness" that the stereotype of "Italian character" entails.

Despite the different opinions among historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, the phenomenon of the psychological reciprocal dependence between mother and son still persists, and it was certainly not an invention of the postwar period as this study will try to show. The debate, moreover, continues into the present as the abovementioned essays prove and is addressed even in scientific studies. Some researchers argue, for example, that one cause of Italian men's poor health compared to women's could be the excessive care and protection they receive from their mothers first and wives later: hence their weaker bodies and inability to take care of themselves.[7] Whether it is seen as a tradition "invented" to explain the ills of a very young country or as a consequence of women's exploitation—men restricting women to the house and entrusting them with the upbringing of the children—the lasting presence of the phenomenon cannot be denied.

Without engaging in a debate that lies outside the scope of this study, I do believe, however, that culture in time becomes nature, character is influenced by history, and culture and character have many components. They work on and influence one another. Finally, works of fiction can often describe our reality more authentically than history can.[8] And works of fiction are the object of this book. Concentrating on five case studies, it examines how the biographical mother-son/artist relationship was elaborated in the work of the son, be it via narrative, poetry, drawing, painting, or film. Although the analysis uses mainly a psychological and psychoanalytical critical approach, my contention, substantiated by some historians, anthropologists and sociologists, is that these specific historical and cultural conditions contributed to and reinforced the Italian character.

The strong mother-son attachment in Italy has a long history. Plutarch writing on Roman families in the second century C.E. noted that mothers possessed greater affection for their sons than for their daughters. In Roman law, a woman was first the property of her father and then of her husband. Even her children did not legally belong to her. A mother's predilection for the male child was, in part, dictated by her need to find the protection through her son that she could not have from her husband. Husbands were absent—involved in business, government, gymnasium—and they were older than their wives. (In Greek society, the wife's treatment was even worse.) Roman women married in their teens men in their twenties or older. The proximity of mother and son resulted in emotional attraction and dependency.[9] Her primary function was to produce heirs and take care of them, while the husband had his life (professional and sometimes sexual and sentimental as well) out-

side the family. The mother in Greek-Roman culture thus turned to her male child for the love, respect, and consideration that she did not receive from her husband, according to Judith Hallett and Philip E. Slater. "She attempted to build him up into an idealized replacement of her husband," with the negative outcome for both that such dependency can create.[10] In this view, a mother's sexual demands, even repressed ones, could make a son feel inadequate. So, the "mother's seductiveness is frightening" to the son. The "Greek boogie were all female creatures" (*The Glory of Hera* 63), and their characteristics show "their connection with fear of the mother's sexuality" (64). In Slater's view, "benevolence among the goddesses was highly correlated with virginity:" Athena over Hera; the former helpful and benevolent, the latter "vindictive and persecutory. . . . It is in fact fair to say that Greek males, as a group, were terrified of any female who was a whole woman" (66).

Camille Paglia in *Sexual Personae* has written at length about man's fear of woman's mystery. "The female's unbearable hiddenness applies to all aspects of men's dealings with women. What does it look like in there? Did she have an orgasm? Is it really my child? Who was my real father? Mystery shrouds woman's sexuality."[11] Although Paglia uses this argument to explain woman's imprisonment and even sexual violence and rape by men, her discussion of the mystery of female sexuality supports my argument. "Every woman's body," she states, "contains a cell of archaic night, where all knowing must stop" (22–23). It is this mystery that can explain man's fear of her. The revolutionary playwright Luigi Pirandello was a victim of the fear of woman's sexuality. The visionary filmmaker Federico Fellini, the subject of chapter 5, was fascinated with its mystery and in search of a revelation. In the next chapter, the relevance of this discourse will be elaborated on.

The power exercised by the mother over the son (and vice versa) in Mediterranean cultures in particular has been long recognized. Much of the responsibility for this excessive maternal love, I will argue, can be traced to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, an influence made more extreme by the long-lasting Spanish influence on Italian soil and by the presence of the Vatican. The psychological relationship, therefore, cannot escape the culture and tradition in which it grows. It derives its strength from the cult of the Virgin Mother—a woman born without original sin; thus, by means of an Immaculate Conception, she holds a place that transcends our material world. Her realm is unreachable. This view was given voice in the mid-twentieth century by the journalist and writer Dino Buzzati (the subject of chapter 4): "Not because she was my mother, but I do believe she was one of the very few creatures born without original sin." This might sound like hyperbole and a rhetorical figure used perhaps to shock the reader, yet it reflects a belief that has a true conviction as well as history behind it.[12]

In "Protestant culture," historian Luisa Accati argues, "there is no sacred figure between the Father and the Son." In contrast, the Catholic culture "has made the maternal image the symbol of the Church, the mother par excellence."[13] Going back in history, the philosopher Luisa Muraro argued that "the patriarchal society, in which philosophy developed, considered the love between mother and son as its most precious good." In her view, it is this love that gave man the ability and power to philosophize. Although her aim is to cultivate mother-daughter love in order to legitimize the same power for women, she underlines the centrality of mother-son love because its origin is rooted in our Western civilization, and Catholicism made it more powerful.[14]

Although the Madonna descended ultimately from the primitive and fecund Mediterranean *Grande Madre*, Catholic tradition emphasized her virginity and effectively ignored the father. In the ancient myth, the Great Mother procreating through parthenogenesis had no need of male cooperation.[15] Mircea Eliade argued that "the theology of Mary the Virgin-Mother appropriates and perfects the very antique Asian and Mediterranean conceptions of parthenogenesis . . . of the Great Goddesses." The success of female divinities in a culture dominated by males, according to Tilde Giani Gallino, comes from the mystery surrounding reproduction. Woman's "reproductive ability" was her occult power, "a hidden secret through which woman manifested her own superiority over man."[16] Like the Great Mother, Mary maintains her ability to give life without male assistance, but she loses the terrifying destructive aspect of the sexuality of the Great Mother. This change was the work of Christianity.[17]

The mother figure of the Catholic tradition was venerated and worshipped as a celestial creature devoted to the well-being of the son with whom she lived in total mutual dependence. In this narrative, it is as if the child had been conceived by the Holy Ghost. Eroticism and sex were relegated to the "erotic woman," often identified with the whore. The power of the mother descended from the Mother of Christ; that of the erotic woman, from the devil. Giovanni Verga's late-nineteenth-century short story "La lupa" (the she-wolf) is a nearly perfect reflection of such beliefs.[18]

The cult of the Virgin Mother was developed by the Catholic Church, and the Jesuits, Catholic priests, and inquisitors were also the architects of the negative image of the female body: "much more susceptible than men's to internal disturbances . . . Naturally inclined to all seven deadly sins, women rarely prove able to withstand the onslaught of temptation. Paradoxically, however, the vast majority of them are not passive objects of the devil's attention but cunning subjects who actively and willingly collaborate with the Evil One."[19] Female eroticism and evil forces, therefore, find their obvious counterpart in the worship of the Virgin Mother.

In the practices of confession and exorcism performed on women in the 1600s, studies have shown, the clergy concluded that physical and psychological illnesses were connected to their sexual organs and attributed them to the actions of the devil that had entered and taken the women over, hence the necessity on the part of the confessor-exorcist to act on these very organs in order to cure the patients. Strong, trusting relationships that were often established between the women and their father confessors would have made the former easy prey of the latter's repressed sexuality. And perhaps the women's own tamed and repressed sexual urges found relief in the actions of their confessors. To see in such a widely diffused practice the origin of the connection of female sexuality with the forces of hell, which still surfaces in modern Italian culture, is a reasonable hypothesis.[20]

The adoration of the mother modeled on the Madonna derives from her self-sacrificing and self-effacing nature as totally devoted to the good of the child. Psychological dependence on the mother has continued in modern times due not only to the Church but also to Italy's historical and political conditions. The fragmentation of the country, occupied for centuries by foreign powers, and the mistrust of the government, always seen as an enemy, have intensified the bonds within the family, perceived as the only protection and support. And this, of course, has been reinforced by the power of the Church.

The social consequences of such bonds have been examined by historians and sociologists. Historian Paul Ginsborg's argument is one of the most persuasive. In his work *Italy and Its Discontents*, he recognizes the presence up to today of the power of the mother. According to Ginsborg, in fact, the assessments made by psychoanalyst Ernst Bernhard (he will be central in the chapter on Fellini) and by psychosocial anthropologist Anne Parsons almost fifty years ago, are still valid today. Ginsborg concludes that "over a period of many centuries, the Virgin Mother has served historically as a role model in a number of different ways: as the supreme example of purity, as the symbol of motherhood defined as pain and sacrifice . . . humility and forgiveness, as a key mediating figure in Catholicism . . . interceding between God the Father and God the Son."[21]

I will analyze some of the ways in which the mother-son relationship has not only affected but actually shaped creative work in five major Italian male artists. In her essay "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva defines modern art (of course, by male artists) as "the implementation of the maternal love," and she goes so far as to argue that it is "a sublimated celebration of incest."[22] It is no coincidence, I believe, that to support her argument she uses three Italian examples: Bellini, Leonardo, and Pergolesi. The mother-son relationship can, therefore, not be severed from its Catholic source.

The Sicilian writer Gesualdo Bufalino called the Sicilian Easter not the celebration of the resurrection of Christ but rather the celebration of the Mater Dolorosa. The bereaved Virgin Mother has inspired innumerable artworks: Michelangelo's Pietà (the Madonna with the body of Christ on her lap), to name just one obvious and famous example. The sacred drama has been taken back to primitive times in the painting by Carlo Levi (the subject of chapter 3), "La strega e il figlio," (The Witch and the Son), which he also describes in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli). In the final scene of "Mal di luna," an episode of the Taviani Brothers' film *Kaos*, where the male body on the woman's lap is that of her wounded husband, the meaning is clear. Since the highest relationship between woman and man is that of mother and son, it must be recreated once the son leaves the mother and marries.[23] The son, in fact, will often search for another mother in his wife, as I will argue in chapter 5 on Fellini.

"She is not a woman," cries the father in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, "she is a Mother." "Mother" is a category unto itself—all-absorbing, obsessive, without any possibility of ever developing other roles.[24] Jung called it the "hypertrophy of the maternal," and more recently, Ada Neiger describes it as the "mystique of maternity," from which women have not yet liberated themselves. Even now, with women in the workforce and with satisfying professions, that myth has not changed much but still burdens the professional woman. She has to be able to be both. The mother, Jung tells us, represents "all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility." Yet, he continues, she also has a negative side, and on that side, "the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces and poisons." She is the "loving and the terrible mother."[25] These are the attributes we can find in the myth of the Great Mother, that is, of the Triple Goddess: the Virgin, the loving Mother, and the terrifying Mother.[26] Those terrifying mothers, Sicilian writer Vitaliano Brancati remarked, first conceive and deliver and then eat up their children. Brancati was speaking of Sicilian mothers, but to some degree, perhaps, it extends to the Italian mother in general.[27]

In a much more dramatic way, the northerner Pier Paolo Pasolini, as will be shown in chapter 2, denounces this dependence in his poem "Supplica a mia madre" (Plea to My Mother). His "supplica," or intense plea, is for what? To sever the tie, to cut the umbilical cord? The tone of his "supplica" is ambiguous. The son realizes his dependence on and his adoration for the mother and recognizes that she is responsible for it, but still, he cannot and does not even really want to escape it. "È dentro la tua grazia che nasce la mia angoscia" (It is within your grace that my anxiety is born).[28] And if he could not find the strength to rebel against his own adored mother—Pasolini chose her for

the role of the Madonna in *The Gospel According to Matthew*—he certainly finds it in his poem "Ballata delle madri" (Ballad of the Mothers), where he addresses them as "Madri vili," "Madri mediocri," "Madri servili," "Madri feroci" (those are the beginning words of each stanza) who create cowardly, mediocre, servile, and ferocious children and who, above all, instill in them "il rifiuto profondo a essere diversi" (the profound refusal to be different), which is, to say, conformism. They, in the end, are conveniently responsible for their children's failures.[29]

The Madonna of the Catholic tradition that places emphasis on her virginity disposes of the father and, in his stead, substitutes a symbiotic and dependent relationship between mother and son. Jungian psychoanalyst Bernhard so describes her:

> She spoils especially her sons instinctively, and they, consequently are demanding. But the more she spoils them, the more she makes them dependent on her, the more natural this demand on the children seems to her, and the more they feel tied and obliged. At this point the good nourishing and protective mother is transformed in her own negative aspect, in the bad mother who holds on to [them], who devours, and who, with her selfish demands impedes her children from reaching independence and renders them ill and unhappy.[30]

Sociological studies have shown that the mechanics that govern Italian families encourage dependency and discourage sociability.[31] Parsons studied Southern Italian families, and her comments can be extended to the Italian family in general. She realized that the dependence "tends to be centripetal rather than centrifugal," with deleterious social consequences. "Parents, or in particular the mother, bring up children in such a way as to strengthen loyalties toward themselves rather than to move them increasingly into a wider social context. This tendency results from the perception of the world outside the family as hostile and threatening and very often as a source of sexual temptations or of delinquency and dishonesty" (*Belief, Magic and Anomie* 16).[32] The Catholic culture of forgiveness, which is intimately connected with the mother-Madonna cult, does not help the situation. No matter how sinful the supplicant is, Parsons continued, "her love and tenderness are always available" (17). She intercedes with the father-God for the sinful child to be forgiven. And so, Italians go on sinning because, eventually, all will be forgiven.[33]

Carlo Tullio Altan studied the phenomenon of *familismo* and traced it back to the historical and social conditions of Italy during the Renaissance.[34] He found it in the writings of Leon Battista Alberti, Francesco Guicciardini, and Niccolò Machiavelli and also in popular proverbs. The Catholic Church, in particular the Counter-Reformation, reinforced this state of affairs by

opposing the formation and development of a public spirit. "Diffuse antisocial mentality, lack of solidarity, of social participation outside of the family circle, accompanied by an absolute refusal to consider any social or political engagement for the good of the collectivity" are the characteristics of the Italians between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Support was sought within the family, which became the "exclusive center of interests and values with its reliance on the patronage system that finds in the informal institution of *comparatico* (the institution of godfather and godmother) its most typical manifestation."[35] In a country whose regions, cities, and *comuni* (municipalities) were taken, exploited, and used as property exchanges and marriage dowries by powerful foreign (as well as local) families, this mentality—together with the widely held suspicion toward the state and the government, which were always exploiting the people—has endured down to the present. Leo Longanesi, and Luigi Barzini before him, remarked that Italy is not a society, but "un insieme di famiglie."[36]

Feminist studies have shown clearly that the image of "the ever-giving, self-sacrificing mother . . . that anticipates and meets the child's every need" and "finds fulfillment and satisfaction in caring for her offspring" is clearly a product of a social construction with patriarchal roots.[37] This social construction has been consolidated with such force throughout the centuries that even more liberated women feel its weight. In her novel *Casalinghitudine* (1987), Clara Sereni confesses her inability to completely cut the umbilical cord that ties her to her son, but at the same time, she realizes the negative effects of such a condition when she recounts the conflict with her mother-in-law. "Massimo was the territory of contention, I would fear he could be sucked up again by his family, by his lack of autonomy, by the delicious meals, the perfectly ironed shirts never missing a button."[38]

The Oedipal dependence of the son on his mother was not invented by Sigmund Freud or by Sophocles. In Luisa Accati's view, Freud failed to give the mother the power she deserves, and Gilles Deleuze is right in acknowledging her influence and authority as major factors in the child's psychosexual development.[39] Accati notes that "the very fact that religion plays a less evident part in contemporary society than in the past, leading us to be less aware of the significance of its symbols and rituals, gives these symbols great power since they can operate unchecked and at the unconscious level, which strongly reinforces social pressure towards conformity in many contexts, not least among social scientists" (244). This view is shared by Gaylyn Studlar, who writes that "Freud failed to adequately acknowledge or investigate the role of the mother as an active, independent, powerful, and even threatening figure." According to Studlar, the mother's authority derives from her importance to the child and not, as Freud claimed, "because she hides the father

figure."[40] Such authority and influence, I would argue, are not limited to the childhood phase of male development; rather, they continue in sublimated form in the adult. The artist's work, as Kristeva stated, is the "implementation of the maternal love."[41]

In Italy, the mother acquired greater responsibility within the family at the end of the nineteenth century than she had ever enjoyed before. As Laura Benedetti showed, at the beginning of that century, at least among the upper classes, the functions of nursing and upbringing were entrusted to more than one person. Before the end of the century, the mother had become the sole caregiver of her children starting from birth. She concentrated exclusively on the well-being of the family, in particular the children, over whom she had full responsibility for physical, moral, and emotional development.[42] In the delicate phase of Italy's unification, the mother's role had patriotic connotations. Her responsibility was to nurture and educate her sons to become the creators of the new nation. Later on, Fascism continued to exalt the role of the mother as the giver of glorious soldiers to the fatherland. And the Catholic Church supported Benito Mussolini by creating "the Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia (ONMI)" (the national organization for the protection of maternity and childhood).[43]

In the Mediterranean female dichotomy—a concept that is fundamental to this study—the mother-Madonna has had a far greater effect on Italian civilization than the erotic whore. The Madonna's power is nearly as great as that of her son. Her tears have moved as many believers as Christ's suffering on the cross. This book will examine the portrait of the artist's mother, Madonna-like in his view, vis-à-vis that of the erotic woman, arguing that the stronger the mother-son relationship, the more phobic the perception of the erotic woman and dysfunctional the male relationship with her. This psychological handicap will impede the son's realization of a complete and healthy relationship with the female sex.

My choice of the examples followed several criteria. Biography was certainly a fundamental one. I have chosen artists who had an intense or complex relationship with their mothers. My aim was also that of showing that this intense relationship, which is often attributed to the more backward South, as it is perceived by Northerners, is instead very much present in the North as well. Starting from the deepest South, the Sicily of Luigi Pirandello, I move north with Pier Paolo Pasolini (Bologna, Casarsa-Friuli, and Rome), and Fellini (Rimini and Rome) and very far north with Carlo Levi (Turin) and Dino Buzzati (Belluno, Veneto). With Levi and Fellini, moreover, I want to examine their relationship not only to their mothers but also to the original mother, the symbolic Great Mother of prehistoric times. A final criterion was the desire to examine a variety of artistic genres in order to show how

this complex relation with mother, and woman in general, is manifested in different artistic media: narrative and drama in Pirandello; poetry and film in Pasolini; drawings and paintings in Levi; narrative and graphic stories in Buzzati; and film and drawing in Fellini.

Though these are all authors of internationally recognized importance, I will also examine some works of theirs that have been less studied and aspects that have not received enough attention. In the case of Pirandello, for example, I have concentrated on his short stories, many of which have not been translated into English and are generally less well-known because, in my view, the true Pirandellian masterpiece is the short story. A brilliant idea, quickly developed and concluded before it falls into rhetorical and repetitive narrative, fits best with Pirandello's philosophy that mistrusts language and believes in the impossibility of real communication. I chose Pasolini's poetry because I desired to connect it with his biography and his relationship with his mother—a theme previously not thoroughly examined. Also, in my view, Pasolini's voice speaks most sincerely through poetry, thus it also reveals his conservatism and his constant struggle against "lo strazio del contraddirmi" (the pain of contradicting myself).

Levi's paintings need to be more rigorously examined in connection with his biography and his strong narcissistic and self-centered nature. Buzzati's work, with the exception of his two major novels, *Il deserto dei Tartari* and *Un amore*, is underrepresented in Anglo-American scholarship, and his innovative graphic production is practically unknown. Finally, I will approach the legend that is Fellini, who has been studied ad nauseam, with an eye to some films but mainly to his drawings and *Il libro dei sogni* (The Book of Dreams), where the director recorded his dreams with narrative and images. A comparison with Buzzati, a pioneer graphic artist, and someone whom Fellini greatly admired, is revealing.

My hope is that this book will stimulate curiosity in some readers and encourage them to read more. In the end, I must confess, I was also inspired by my somewhat mischievous desire to reveal the weaknesses of artists who have long been studied and praised. (Yes, they are all males.) This is the ultimate reason for this book.

THE INDIVIDUAL CHAPTERS

"Maternity and Sexuality: Pirandello's Constant Obsessions," (chapter 1) examines short stories, novels, and plays that deal with the mother/erotic woman dichotomy, a constant presence in his opus. The worship of the mother figure in Pirandello, as with other Southern writers, is connected with

the fear of sex, specifically female sexual desire, which they considered evil. The mother-whore dichotomy in Pirandello's writings will be connected with his life and attitudes toward sex. Many episodes in his life corroborate the views he expresses in his texts. The chapter, therefore, follows Pirandello's life and places it next to his creative work. Many of his stories found inspiration from biographical events, and his father and mother often appear as characters in them.

Opposing the mother-Madonna was the erotic woman of Pirandello's imagination whom he constantly described with negative qualifiers as a menace and a danger. That her body was clearly the source of great discomfort, even of fear, appears clearly in many of his short stories. In following his life and his artistic production, this chapters shows how his views of the theater evolved while those of the mother figure and of women in general remained essentially the same: Maternity was the female's highest function even though it involved sex. I discuss this subject via short stories that have been given less critical attention than Pirandello's novels and plays. The chapter concludes with Pirandello's appropriation of the maternal function through artistic creation. Woman gives birth to frail, weak creatures; the artist, to immortal characters.

Pasolini engaged his mother in a dialogue through poetry. The core of chapter 2, "Pasolini's Poetry: The Language of the Mother," in fact, will examine what I consider a dialogue between son and mother that could only take place through the language of poetry (although I also devote some discussion to Pasolini's films). If we consider the number of pages Pasolini dedicated to poetry (over 3,000)—far more than to any other artistic enterprise—and the ways in which many of his poems featured his mother in a variety of forms as his interlocutor, we realize how vital her presence was in his life, both the everyday and the creative. Because it is able to express truth and authenticity through images, poetry occupies a sacred place for Pasolini. It is the maternal language that allows the most intimate connections. Through it, the mother-son union takes place.

Pasolini's sacred love for his mother kept him from ever consummating a fully realized love with anyone else. It was only physical love that he asked for and gave to others—a love he could not share with his mother. "Il mio amore/è solo per la donna: infante e madre./Solo per essa, impegno tutto il cuore. Per loro, i miei coetanei, i figli, in squadre/meravigliosi sparsi per pianure/e colli, per vicoli e piazzali, arde/in me solo la carne" (My love is only for the woman: infant and mother/Only for her do I commit my whole heart. For the others, those of my age, the sons, in wondrous groups/scattered through plateaus/and hills, small streets and piazzas/it is only my flesh that burns).[44] Pasolini's divided self, the spiritual and the corporeal, could never be one. His inability to reconcile the two became his obsession.

In Pasolini, the figure of the mother in her original purity and authenticity finds a parallel in his love for primitive society untouched by civilization. Levi shared this attachment to the pre-historical phase of mankind. In chapter 3, "Carlo Levi and the Great Mother," Jung provides helpful theoretical tools with which to study the painter and writer. Although Levi, too, had a special relationship with his mother, and even more with the various women who raised and pampered him and later with his lovers, the maternal figure that becomes central in his work, especially his painting, is the Great Mother of the beginning of history, the prime creator, in whom procreation and eroticism were unified. She coincides with what Levi called the "*indistinto originario*" (the primeval indistinctness) from which individuals detach and distinguish themselves through a civilizing process but to which they feel forever drawn back. If man's emancipation, maturation, and social engagement are the aim of every individual, this *indistinto originario* will remain Levi's faith and strongest belief throughout his life. I would argue, in fact, that his social commitment and political engagement were the conscious and willed decisions Levi had repeatedly to make to counterbalance the constant attraction and pull, similar to that experienced by Pasolini, toward the origin, the *indistinto*. His true attachment was to that. His most successful artistic work was created in Lucania, a place he felt that had not yet emerged from that *indistinto*, where he discovered "la Lucania che è in ciascuno di noi" (the Lucania that is in each of us).[45] Since the *indistinto* is the realm of the irrational and the instinctive and has no logical structure, words can express it only approximately. If Pasolini's most successful attempts to return to the origin were through poetry, Levi's were through painting. Even in his writings, in fact, he remained a painter. Man's life, according to him, consists of a continuous oscillation between the return to the undifferentiated origin and that process of differentiation that makes us individuals.

Pasolini and Levi both shared the myth of the primitive, the pre-historical, the love for those areas of the world where modernization has not yet arrived, where authenticity and the sacred still exist and had not yet been corrupted or eliminated. After discovering it in Lucania, Levi looked for it in Sardinia and in Sicily just as Pasolini turned to Africa and India after Casarsa and the Roman slums.

With the northerner Buzzati, we return to the Catholic dichotomy of saintly mother/erotic woman-whore in chapter 4, titled "Dino Buzzati, the Mother and the Witches." Mostly known for his novel *Il deserto dei Tartari* (*The Tartar Steppe*), one of the very few examples of Italian magical realism (which might have inspired J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*), Buzzati was a journalist, a writer, and a cartoonist. He had an intense relationship with his mother, with whom he lived until her death. Only then, at age sixty,

did he marry. I will analyze his writings and drawings to show how his obsessive relationship with his mother shaped most of his work.

Asked in various interviews why he waited until his mother was dead to marry, he would reply that he and his brothers (their sister did marry) had the good fortune of having a mother who was able to maintain the same family atmosphere as when they were children, so that none of them felt the need to form another family. "The only woman who abolished solitude," Buzzati used to say of her. She was the foil against which most of the female characters of his works were created.[46]

In his novel *Un amore*, the protagonist, clearly modeled on the author and his life, falls madly in love with a very young prostitute—a love that could not possibly find fulfillment. For this reason, it is pursued—a love based exclusively on the erotic attraction stimulated by its very baseness. It is, however, in Buzzati's graphic book *Poema a fumetti* that his sexual phobias and misogyny are driven home in a gut-wrenching way. Terrifying naked females with gigantic buttocks, breasts, and mouths occupy entire pages, ready to gobble up the reader. Those images shout out Buzzati's obsession with and fear of the erotic female. Buzzati himself said that this *Poema a fumetti* "came out of his guts" and that he chose images over words "perché mi sono illuso, disegnando, di poter dire cose che con le parole non sarei riuscito a dire abbastanza chiaramente" (because I deluded myself that by drawing I could say things that I would not be able to express clearly enough with words); or, we might add, that he could have been ashamed to put in writing.[47] *Il deserto dei Tartari,* I believe, can be revisited in light of those observations, as it manifests that fear and hostility toward the world outside the family that is consequence of the excessive mutual dependence of mother and son.[48]

The first part of the chapter 5 on Fellini will trace his move from Rimini to Rome, the absence of his mother and a mother figure, his attachment to Rome that he saw as his real mother, and his marriage with Giulietta Masina, a woman very different from the voluptuous, erotic types that Fellini desired. Masina became his maternal figure and his artistic muse. With her constantly at his side, I argue, Fellini could continue to dream and pursue, figuratively and literally, the erotic *femmes fatales*. This appears clearly both in films where he directs her (*La strada*, *Le notti di Cabiria*, *Giulietta degli spriti*, and *Ginger and Fred*), as well as in those in which she did not star. In the second part of the chapter, I give special attention to *Il libro dei sogni*, where Fellini's desires, fears, phobias, and weaknesses are revealed. He started writing down and illustrating his dreams after his encounter with Jungian psychoanalyst Ernst Berhnard. Jung, in fact, became a strong influence in Fellini's work. In his dreams, Masina often appears as a suffering, saintly creature, always dressed, at times, close to death, while the overendowed females he craved,

always naked, offer themselves to him. Homoerotic desires appeared in some dreams and are compared with scenes in *Casanova* and *Satyricon* that reveal his fascination with the subject.

Rarely did the artists whose lives and work are treated in the earlier chapters of this study collaborate, but there is an outstanding exception. Fellini admired Buzzati's writing and drawings and shared the same taste for subject matter: Threatening, naked female bodies will also appear in Fellini's films. From *Giulietta degli spiriti* (1965) to *La città delle donne* (1981), the director portrayed females who might have emerged from Buzzati's pen or brush. Misogyny and fear of women could not have been more clearly expressed than in *La città delle donne* (*City of Women*), an apparent mockery of feminism and women's social struggle, where the male protagonist doesn't score high points.[49] What Aine O'Healy said about the female characters in Fellini's last films *Intervista* (*Interview*) and *La voce della luna* (*The Voice of the Moon*) certainly applies to the early ones as well. "The sexually voracious woman is not a common character type in cinematic representation. . . . In most film traditions, female desire is rarely shown as exceeding the economy of male desire, since women's sexuality is imagined in direct relation to male pleasure. When female desire does exceed male need, it is almost always represented as threatening or grotesque," which is precisely how the women in many Fellini's films are represented. Think, for example, of La Saraghina in *Eight and 1/2*, or the tobacconist in *Amarcord*.[50] Moreover, if Buzzati saw his graphic opera work in tandem with his narrative—after all, he repeated over and over that he was always narrating stories—Fellini saw it as a way to clarify his ideas about the characters that would then become alive in his films.

Finally, Fellini collaborated with Buzzati on a film project he wanted very much to make but that never became realized. No one was able to assess how much Buzzati contributed to Fellini's script, but it probably inspired his *Poema a fumetti*. Fellini's script tells the story of a trip to the underworld undertaken by an artist who eventually realizes that he is dead. But *Il viaggio di G. Mastorna* became only a book with cartoons that Fellini realized with the collaboration of Milo Manara in 1992. Given the subject of the script and Fellini's superstitious nature, he was probably afraid that by making the film he would bring about his own death, not only that of his protagonist. The book was fated to have the same tragic effect: Fellini died a year after publication in 1993.

The book ends with the chapter "Vitellonismo in Cinema." Although the *vitelloni* have been considered a cultural construction of the economic boom of the 1950s, they can also be seen as the product of an obsessive relationship between mothers and sons. As Fellini often repeated that Italian males